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ABSTRACT

Several obstacles to social and intellectual growth confron the disadvantaged student whose nonstandard dialect is unacceptable to many users of standard English. To help him develop a bidialectalism that minimizes these obstacles, the English teacher needs to guide the student to explore the ways in which language conveys meaning; to experience the power of words both in his own dialect and in standard English; to express ideas through oral and written composition; and to use the English language laboratory. This classroom laboratory should provide records, tapes, and programed television where students gain intensive training in hearing significant word segments, experience in constructing sentences with a minimum of drill work, opportunities to become familiar with written news media, and the chance to engage in a variety of speech activities. (JM)

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THE BERLIN WALL OF LANGUAGE: THE PROBLEM AND SOLUTION

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The disadvantaged student has a limited experience with language because he does not have the opportunities to use language in the normal give and take pattern essential to his social adjustment and intellectual development. Another form of his language problem is that the dialect characteristic of his particular race, nationality, or community is totally unacceptable to many teachers and the members of society who use standard English. A different slant on the language problem encountered by the disadvantaged student is evidenced in the limited vocational opportunities available to him. Non-standard English limits a student's economic scope. For most jobs of status and good income, an understanding of and competence in standard English are mandatory: any unusual language of the culturally different becomes one more obstacle to desirable economic opportunities.

One platitude that some high school English teachers espouse is that the student should totally divorce himself of his non-standard dialect. This would be equivalent to telling the student to forget his background, his parents, and his environment. Eradicating the dialect altogether would cause a more severe problem linguistically, socially, and emotionally for the disadvantaged student. Furthermore, extirpation of the dialect would not be reinforced in the recreation areas or in the home. Instead of a substitution, bidialectalism may better suit the needs of the student and the teacher. If a student choose, he may use his old dialect at home, on the playground, or in other areas where he feels more comfortable with it, but be able to switch dialects when the occasion arises. Bidialectalism offers him the chance of adapting to any situation, linguistically and socially.

Ambitious students in slum areas intuitively shift their speech patterns in the direction of the prestigious local pattern in situations where they feel such a shift will be to their advantage. Some actually, on their own, achieve a high degree of functional bidialectalism, switching codes as the situation warrants.

Lesser ambitious students will need more guidance. Both types, however, will benefit from an understanding teacher who can help them realize that dialect differences do not reflect intellectual or moral differences—only differences in experiences. A successful teacher of disadvantaged students must first create an atmosphere of respect, warmth, and sincere interest. This may take a semester since he has backlogs of experiences with which to cope. The disadvantaged student has, with the help of society, built a Berlin wall of language at which the teacher must gradually and carefully chip away.

One way the teacher can do this is to have students explore how a language works to convey meaning—not just lexical meaning but the structural meaning inherent in the arrangement of words in certain grammatical relationships, and the semantic meanings resulting from words used to convey attitudes and feelings. The student discovers that the language is full of alternatives which only he can choose. And he should be permitted to make the decision.

Another way in which the teacher can help the child chip away at the wall is by helping him experience the power of words, which in turn enables him to see the power of the languages. Power comes from knowledge and skills. A student should be given many opportunities to use the language he can use while simultaneously being exposed profusely to the language he should use. One dialect should not be rejected in favor of the other. By the same token, the teacher need not be the only source of model English. Records, tapes, films, and radio broadcasts can provide good models in many voices, styles, and regional variations.

Helping the student to become bidialectal can be achieved with outstanding results in an English language laboratory into which any classroom can be converted with some degree of modification and ingenuity on the part of the teacher. The philosophy behind the laboratory is that, given the chance to hear himself as others hear him, the student may become his own best critic. He is given the opportunity to hear and practice good speech forms until he feels comfortable in using them. The teacher is there to guide, encourage, and praise all attempts at self-improvement.

The student uses records, tapes, and even programmed television. For large classes, as often found in the larger systems, a group of students, preferably three to six in number, may share one

tape recorder or record player by means of an aggregate board equipped with phono-jack openings for plugging in earphones. The group situation gives them a chance to react to each other as well as to the audio-visual aid, learning from each other with as much, if not greater, rapidity and ease as from the teacher or teaching machine. It is possible for this activity to be going on in a corner of a large classroom while the rest of the class is engaged in other work.

The first crucial factor in any audio-visual lingual practice is the ear. Unless the ear can hear correctly, oral practice can be harmful, because when the wrong thing is repeated, the habit is reinforced. It seems well established that a human being sees and hears only what he wants to see and hear. Often, the disadvantaged student has not trained his ear to pick up **s** and **ed** endings. Such a student must be intensively trained to listen to and hear significant sound segments in a word.

It is by now obvious that along with language laboratory activity some sort of drill work is unavoidable. Obviously, an abundance of drill work for the sake of drilling may thwart the student's desire to acquire another dialect—thereby handicapping the progress of both teacher and student. Standardized drills as found in reading kits and grammar books may be handy aids for the teacher. In most cases, however, the teacher may realize the need to phrase or construct sentences and expressions in light of the student's particular background and experiences.

Newspaper and magazine articles are excellent study materials to have in the language laboratory. Since the language of the news publications is adaptable to all social classes' levels of understanding, the disadvantaged student, in addition to improving his language pattern, may become aware that he is able to understand what is going on around him and even able to converse on the issues given attention in the publications.

The most significant phase of the language laboratory will be the opportunity for the students to engage in speech activity—not the oral drill type, but the oral communication between and among students. This will allow the student to express himself freely, without fear of being "corrected." Constant interruptive criticism by the teacher such as "Don't say I done," could cause the student to "clam up" and refuse to participate in these sessions. However,

once the sessions are underway, students' criticisms of each other will be beneficial. It has been the author's experience that students receive criticism from their peers much better than from the teacher no matter how much tact and diplomacy are employed by the teacher.

Topics for discussion may be **suggested** by the teacher or, preferably, from a panel composed of students, with the teacher acting as a resource person only. Impromptu talks, speech games, telephone conversations, dramatic readings, role playing, talkathons, interviews with people from legitimate businesses in the community—all provide opportunities for the student to engage in verbal exchange.

An important factor to be considered in scheduling activities for the laboratory is variety. Variety makes for interest; interest makes for participation. Another significant factor is that the activities must meet the needs of the students. The entire program is geared toward eliminating their linguistic inadequacies, enabling them to become a part of the mobile society.

Oral composition, in itself, is not the only means of approaching and treating the problem of the disadvantaged student. Students like to write, especially if they have something to say. That "something to say" may come out as a result of reading a short story, poem or novel. The students, having been active participants in oral composition, will be more resolved to express their ideas on paper for two reasons. First, they have developed confidence in themselves through verbal exchange. Secondly, they feel more comfortable with the standard patterns of expression, though not perfected, than before.

Here, literature acts as the springboard for written composition. Through literature, preferably that with which the student may readily identify, ideas for themes or discussions are manifested. Joe in **Up the Down Staircase** is real because he is the representation of the student's frustrations and hostilities. Students prefer and enjoy novels and short stories which depict the plights as well as the successes of characters with whom the students may identify racially, socially, economically, and educationally. The disadvantaged student does not identify with the middle class hero or heroine who leads a carefree, typical adolescent life culminating in a prosperous, secure adult life. There are some students who do not want to identify with

a character **per se** but with a human value which can be implemented in their own lives.

One of the purposes of literature is to deal with human emotions. The writer subjects his characters to all sorts of stresses and strains in all types of situations to test their strengths and weaknesses and to examine their emotional reactions. The disadvantaged child, with his more than usual frustrations, can be helped through literature to release his emotions vicariously. Literature also educates the student by helping him to understand his own feelings and reactions through those of the characters in literature. The characters are fictitious in one way but real in another. When the disadvantaged student immerses himself in literature, he comes out with a deeper insight into human values—those of others and those of himself.

It remains with the truly sincere teacher to open the disadvantaged student's eyes to an important fact about himself. The disadvantaged student is capable of becoming a part of mobile society through bidialectalism and the creation of a sense of pride and worth in himself.